

Meeting humanitarian challenges in urban areas

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As humanitarian actors develop new modalities for addressing growing levels of urban displacement, a Task Force of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group reviewed the changing context and the main characteristics of the challenges in question.¹ This article is based on the findings of the Task Force.

Over many decades, humanitarian policymakers and practitioners have focused primarily on rural emergencies and disasters. However, with the recognition that urban areas already are and increasingly will be where humanitarian needs are to be met, humanitarian actors and agencies are increasingly directing their attention to cities and

towns in the global south and are pursuing urban policy initiatives.

Although nowhere is immune from urban disasters and humanitarian crises, cities in the developing world are far more vulnerable to the consequences than those in the developed world. The risk of disaster is sharply increased by rapid urbanisation, and poorly managed or uncontrolled urbanisation and inadequate governance contribute to and may even cause humanitarian crises.

More than three billion people now live in urban areas worldwide. Over one billion of these urban dwellers live in slums and informal 'spontaneous' settlements – mainly in sub-Saharan Africa and south-east Asia. Rapidly growing, unregulated and under-serviced urban areas are high-risk locations rendering the majority of urban dwellers vulnerable to a range of disasters and crises. The increasing stress on urban environments derives both from existing deficits in the supply of land, housing and urban infrastructure and the rapidly increasing demand for these resources as cities grow by between 5 and 10% a year. These processes, and the sub-standard conditions in which so many city dwellers live, contribute to chronic or slow-onset emergencies or become the tipping points for humanitarian crises.

Conditions creating vulnerability

Overcrowding, poor living conditions, lack of access to

clean water and adequate sanitation in urban settings contribute to health emergencies including outbreaks of communicable diseases. Urban populations are at high risk of food insecurity (high prices, food shortages, lack of safety nets) due to poor public health conditions, loss of livelihoods, income insecurity and marginalisation. Beneficiary targeting in health and nutrition crises is especially challenging. Moreover, health and nutrition crises may be the by-product of other emergencies such as flooding, earthquakes or urban violence, creating so-called 'stress bundles'.

Climate change and the increasing propensity for cities to experience disasters caused by more frequent extreme weather events will be compounded by rising sea-levels, desertification and drought, thereby driving population displacement and producing new patterns of intra- and inter-urban migration as the displaced search for new land to settle on. Urban disaster risk reduction and preparedness, mitigation, response and reconstruction will come to dominate humanitarian policies and programmes in the coming decades.

The lack of effective preparedness for multiple hazards and limited mitigation measures compound the vulnerabilities of urban populations. Moreover, these same countries are often characterised by poor governance and the limited empowerment of civil society actors necessary to mobilise public agencies and communities when disasters and crises strike.

Although in absolute terms more people will be affected in the large and mega-cities, it is in fact medium- and small-sized cities in the developing world which are more predisposed to these crises. This is because they are generally less well resourced in terms of professional capacity, governance and finance. Their vulnerability



Slum housing in the Ebute Metta district of Lagos, Nigeria.



Bacoor Cavite area south of Manila, the Philippines.

is also greater because of more limited investment in infrastructure and urban services such as water supply, solid waste management systems and health services. In addition, there is less experience of working with humanitarian actors and other international agencies.

Despite the susceptibility of urban areas, we have insufficient data to accurately map, assess and predict the distribution of urban 'hot spots' (regions, cities and areas within cities) at risk of disasters and humanitarian emergencies. Better mapping is critical for preparedness planning and the effective operational capacity of humanitarian organisations.

Experience over many years shows that conflict and disasters often drive large-scale sudden displacements of rural populations to cities and towns. This trend has increased considerably in recent years; more and more refugees and internally displaced people migrate to cities and towns during and after conflict, seeking protection or to reduce their visibility. The new UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas² is a reflection of these changing trends. Displacement places extra stress on urban services and resources with forced migrants and existing urban dwellers sharing densely populated and poorly serviced environments. Increased competition and conflict between communities over limited urban resources such as land and water may further exacerbate the potential for urban crises.

It is important to stress that disasters and humanitarian emergencies have an additional impact on the urban poor and displaced populations not because of the events themselves but because their vulnerability is exacerbated by three factors. First, governments rarely have the capacity to protect poor urban residents by providing satisfactory water supply and drainage systems, effective protection from floods, safe land for housing or sound public health systems. Second, the impoverishment of slum dwellers, refugees and displaced persons compels them to live in hazard-prone locations such as low-lying areas and landfill sites or in sub-

standard, crowded and insanitary housing. Third, these conditions expose communities to a cocktail of multiple hazards, the 'stress-bundles' mentioned above.

Institutional architecture

Perhaps the biggest challenge for humanitarian actors – and also a major opportunity – is to develop ways of working with the existing institutional framework of municipal and civil society organisations which exists in most towns and cities in the developing world. Inter-agency cooperation is the key to successful humanitarian operations in urban areas but the range of interlocutors is substantial and includes local governments, service-providing agencies, line departments of national and provincial governments, urban councils and technical departments, faith-based groups and community-based organisations, police forces and academia.

One problem is that many of these agencies may be orientated to developmental programmes. It is therefore important for disaster preparedness and management planning to be incorporated into their operations in order to harness their capacity and local knowledge in disasters and humanitarian emergencies. There are often national and local agencies specially designated to respond to disasters and to coordinate relief and reconstruction; local professional resources are therefore likely to be available. It is possible to mobilise recovery plans quite quickly since affected populations can be more easily reached because – ironically – of the dense living conditions.

There exist a number of urban networks which normally are less associated with government and humanitarian operations. These include the private sector, academia and other civil society organisations. As these often have knowledge, experience and expertise on disaster management and risk reduction, efforts should be made to coordinate with these actors in urban areas and exploit their capacity to participate in humanitarian assistance, risk reduction and early recovery operations. Some UN Country Teams are currently setting up

committees or stakeholder groups to address urban challenges in collaboration with national and local government institutions and civil society organisations.

Such collaboration may constitute a substantial contrast with the modalities of humanitarian response in rural areas, where international humanitarian actors may be the only competent response agencies. In urban areas, it is the local leaders, decision makers and interlocutors who take, and must continue to take, the lead in mobilising and coordinating humanitarian action and also in managing urban risk reduction, and contingency and recovery planning. International actors will usually play a support role, supplementing the services and resources available in urban areas where these are inadequate to meet the basic demands of the populations in need.

This role creates unfamiliar challenges for humanitarian actors and may make it difficult for humanitarian agencies to develop effective collaboration. Identifying these interlocutors and developing collaborative partnerships with local governmental and non-governmental actors can be complex but is an essential task. Slow decision-making as well as duplication and fragmentation of responsible agencies may produce operational delays. These conditions may cause frustration for international actors who are used to mobilising rapid responses in rural areas, less fettered by public authorities.

Nevertheless, despite the presence of an institutional infrastructure in urban areas, inevitably there are many 'governance gaps'. Urban government staff may have been affected by natural disasters or fled armed conflict or been implicated in urban violence. Vital administrative resources such as land registers, maps and office equipment may have been destroyed, creating additional challenges for both local administrators and their counterparts in international organisations in planning and implementing emergency assistance.

In contrast to working independently, the less familiar

role of collaborating with and supporting urban governmental and non-governmental institutions in emergencies, and sometimes in natural disasters, may challenge the humanitarian principles of international actors. In recent cases, corruption and land grabs as well as situations where local authorities and officials may be politically implicated in humanitarian emergencies have challenged and potentially limited the operational scope of international agencies and organisations.

Operational and sectoral challenges

Targeting vulnerable communities and groups in need is a major challenge for humanitarian actors in urban areas because the potential beneficiaries are sometimes highly mobile, often inaccessible and frequently integrated into existing slums and settlements scattered across the city. Refugees and IDPs who have been displaced in or to urban areas compound these difficulties since they often have particular reasons for remaining hidden, such as fear of harassment, detention or eviction. Thus, safeguarding the rights of refugees, IDPs and disaster-affected populations in post-disaster and post-conflict return or relocation is especially problematic in this context.

Tracking, profiling, registering and documenting target groups dispersed in often inaccessible urban areas in order to meet their needs for material assistance and protection requires effective community outreach. Different kinds of tools to access disaster victims and displaced persons may be available in an urban setting; text messaging and the internet, for example, may be used to complement more 'traditional' means such as local media and community organisations.

International humanitarian actors have developed an extensive range of policies, practices and tools for development and humanitarian work in rural areas which may be transferable to urban settings. But adaptation to this new context, where established regulations, codes and procedures will already exist, is a challenge and new policies and

ways of working at both agency and inter-agency levels may be required. One example of re-orientation and the development of new procedures is the current revision of the Sphere Project Handbook.³ Others are the development of guidelines on shelter provision for affected urban populations⁴ and WFP's review of food targeting practices in urban areas. However, many agencies are currently responding on a case-by-case basis and there is a clear need for training and more systematic, mainstreamed urban-based interventions.

Another major operational challenge for international actors is to assist in finding durable solutions for displaced populations in urban settings. Many refugees and IDPs, especially in situations of protracted displacement, may be unable or unwilling to return, preferring to try to integrate in the cities where they currently reside. Others remain in urban areas because of insecurity or worse material conditions back home than those they face as displaced 'temporary' residents in the urban slums.

Different types of disasters, humanitarian crisis and early recovery situations in urban locations call for different modes of humanitarian action. For example, the mapping of transition from chronic conditions to a crisis and then early recovery is poorly developed. Yet these transitions have crucial implications for defining the entry and exit points for humanitarian actors.

Protecting the rights of refugees, IDPs and other displaced people in urban settings – creating 'humanitarian space' – is a major challenge. This sits alongside the 'hidden crisis' of urban violence, social unrest and the growing insecurity of urban populations (notably women and children) resulting from the incidence of civil conflicts and different forms of armed violence which can exacerbate or be sources of humanitarian crises.

Linking risk reduction to humanitarian assistance in urban areas constitutes another operational challenge for which humanitarian actors are potentially

well placed to respond through their expertise in risk assessment, disaster preparedness and response. Bridging development and humanitarian work, accordingly, constitutes a vital contribution to meeting humanitarian challenges in urban areas in order to promote durable, sustainable interventions which minimise future urban vulnerabilities. A number of organisations have developed risk and population vulnerability mapping.⁵ However, it is worth stressing that urban dwellers are usually exposed to a range of risks and hazards and humanitarian actors must integrate these compound conditions into their policies, programmes and practices.

Underpinning these operational challenges is the need to attract donor support – a major concern for humanitarian actors. There has been little systematic analysis of the current scope and distribution of funding for urban humanitarian and disaster preparedness and relief programmes. Although urban populations can be captured in general humanitarian responses, donors have yet to develop strategies for designating funds for humanitarian operations in urban areas. The projected increase in the number of countries with urban localities at risk, however, will accelerate demand for funding in an era of resource scarcity. These trends will affect funding allocations from Consolidated Appeals and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and will constitute another challenge for humanitarian agencies.

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1. Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas Task Force led by UN-HABITAT <http://tinyurl.com/IASC-MHCUA>

2. <http://www.unhcr.org/4ab356ab6.html>

3. <http://www.sphereproject.org/content/view/476/278/>

4. Led by NRC/IDMC and Shelter Centre with OCHA, UN-HABITAT and a number of NGOs. <http://tinyurl.com/ShelterCentre-UrbanProject>

5. For example, IFRC, NRC, UN-HABITAT, WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, WFP, OCHA, ISDR, Shelter Centre and others.